

# IDENTITY ISSUES OF THE GEORGIAN DIASPORA IN KURGAN

## Abstract

After Russian-Turkish war in the end of 19th century, some part of Muslim population of Georgians, residing on this territory, decided to immigrate to Ottoman land.

The purpose of the research was studying and identifying the ethnic identity of Georgian Diaspora in Korgan, their economic and cultural interests and determine the possibilities of increasing their contacts with historical homeland based on the above. The research was conducted within the frames of the students' project at the department of social and political sciences of I. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University.

The research was held in several stages. At the first stage the research dealt with ethnic identity of Georgian population based on the following aspects: the level of language maintenance, historical memory, the knowledge of the history of respondents' own family names and ethnic belonging. One important aspect was also their knowledge about Georgia.

At the second stage the researchers attempted to identify the views of ethnic Georgians concerning the most relevant way to develop links with Georgia. In this case, we took into consideration the respondent's profession and status, and the interview was carried out in the relevant direction.

As for the third stage, researchers attempted to find out what the most relevant way to develop contacts between Korgan population and Georgia, defining what problems or perspectives existed in either direction.

### **Georgian Diaspora in Kurgan**

After Russian-Turkish war in 1877-1878, Russia got hold of one more historic part of Georgia - Batumi district. Some part of Muslim population of Georgians, residing on this territory, decided to immigrate to Ottoman land. According to Fevzi Chelebi (Chelebadze), a Georgian scientist working in Turkey, "Ottoman Empire sheltered at least half million people having fled from these lands. The main reason for resettlement was political and economic pressure, exerted on Georgian Muslims".

Following the agreement concluded between Russia and Turkey on 27 January of 1879 in Istanbul, official process of resettlement began on 3 February 1879, which lasted for years. In the end of the 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 35 villages emerged around Patsa, inhabited only by Georgians, and in the entire vilayet of Ordu there were about 100 villages. The settlers of Georgian villages around Patsa came from Kobuleti and they call themselves, Churuksuelebi.

At present in Kurgan and its adjacent four villages - Yazlık, Saralıç, Yeşilalan, Tepelân, live about 5 thousand ethnic Georgians. This is the figure which the diaspora representatives name themselves.

### **The aim of the research**

The aim of the research was to study the ethnic identity of Georgian diaspora in Korgan, identify their economic and cultural interests and determine the possibilities of increasing their contacts with historical homeland based on the above. The research was conducted within the frames of the students' project at the department of social and political sciences of I. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University.

The research is based on in-depth interviews as well as focus groups. In total 6 focus groups were formed, out of which five were composed of only men and one –of women of different ages. In-depth

interviews were conducted with several local entrepreneurs to identify problems or perspectives regarding the relationships with Georgia. The group of researchers conducted interviews with several representatives of local government as well.

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At the second stage the researchers attempted to identify the views of ethnic Georgians concerning the most relevant way to develop links with Georgia. In this case, we took into consideration the respondent's profession and status, and the interview was carried out in the relevant direction.

As for the third stage, researchers attempted to establish what the respondents considered to be the most relevant way to develop contacts with Georgia and what problems or perspectives existed in either direction.

### **Theoretical framework**

In order to conduct the research into ethnic identity, it is necessary to determine in the first place what this concept implies. There are many different opinions among scientists regarding this term. For instance, Nancy Evans considers that identity is: the existence of common cultural, religious, geographical and linguistic consciousness, which is reinforced by family ties and sense of belonging (Evans et al., 2010).

Ethnic identity within this paper is comprehended within the modernist theory of nationalism (Anderson, Gelner, Hatcher, and others).

The work will use the existing theory of constructivism on ethnic identity, according to which, the ethnic identity of the society is not determined by historical past, but it can be formed on the basis of current

reality. Ethnic identity is a socially construed phenomenon, which is at the same time dynamic and is subject to the changes in time. To determine ethnic identity we can distinguish several aspects:

- Language
- Traditions
- Relationships with other members of the group
- Involvement of the group in common activities
- Belonging
- A desire of a group to get familiar with other people having similar culture
- Historical memory, heredity, values.

### **Dual identity of ethnic Georgians in Kurgan**

Ethnic Georgians in Kurgan have dual identity. They are the citizens of Turkey and Turkish identity is dominant in these people. As for the Georgian identity, it is secondary and tends to be fading.

In what way is Turkish identity revealed? These people are integrated into Turkish world. They have no problems in relations with Turkish population or government. Ethnic Georgians and the Turks are of the same religious confession, they are Muslims- the Sunnis. Besides, ethnic Georgians do their best to demonstrate “exemplary” behavior and observance of religious traditions. They receive education in Turkish language and not only do they know it well, but it has actually become their native language. They communicate with each other and family members mainly in Turkish.

### **The elements of Georgian identity**

Along with identifying themselves as Turkish citizens, the population of ethnic Georgian origin in Kurgan also delineate themselves from neighboring ethnic Turks. As well as that, the Georgians are proud

of famous people living in Turkey or serving in the government there who are ethnically of Georgian origin.

Georgian identity of ethnic Georgian population in Kurgan is being formed through several major elements:

- Diasporic historical memory;
- Family name;
- Georgian language;
- „Distinction by appearance”

Below we will discuss each element separately.

### **Diasporic historical memory**

Georgians living in Kurgan do not know the history of Georgia. Their historical memory is in fact of diasporic character. They know only that they “come from Batumi”; some of them remember their family stories about their resettlement to Kurgan; they have a desire to maintain diasporic memory, however, nobody has ever written the history of Georgian diaspora. There is also a wish to create ethnographic museum of Georgian diaspora in Kurgan (Ali Katamadze, a local businessman and a resident of Kurgan is planning to do this. Mr. Katamadze is interested in history and has a small “ethnographic corner” in his house).

The history of Georgian diaspora in Kurgan can be shortly recounted as follows: “Settlers from Ajara could not bring much with them. In most cases they had only what they could carry on their backs. When they arrived at the seaside, they did not like it much, as they were “stung by mosquitos” and that is why they “headed to the mountains” (and this is understandable, as the settlers from the mountainous Ajara were seeking the similar living conditions). Besides, they had to go higher and higher, since the best living areas had been occupied and the dwellers directed the newcomers to the mountain wooded forests. They had to settle under the hardest conditions as they did not have any working tools, or any seeds to sow. Once they did not know the language, they were not able to communicate with locals. It took many

years before they managed to get to their feet and many people fell victim to hardship (“half of them died out”). When they settled down the “wars started” (Balkan wars, WWI, the war started by Ata Turk) where “men were taken, and many died”.

### **Family name as an identification factor**

The representatives of ethnic Georgian diaspora in Kurgan have Turkish first and last names, but they, as a rule, remember their Georgian names as well, however, many of them cannot say the ending of their name. For instance, some may say that their name is “Jinchar-Oghli”, “Natsar-Oghli”. But after they are told their names are Jincharadze or Natsarashvili, they agree. Others can say their Georgian name correctly.

Some of them seem to have forgotten their ancestors’ family name. One respondent said that his ancestors “came from Chakvi”, but he did not remember his Georgian name.

Georgian names in Kurgan are: Katamadze, Jincharadze, Natsarashvili, Noghaideli, Papunaishvili, Romanidze, Mikeladze, Ananidze, etc.

When a Georgian from Kurgan meets someone, who has arrived from Georgia, the first thing they do is to look for their namesake and asks their name; they are proud of their Georgian name and ask if “it is a good name”. When they learn it is a good name, it makes them happy. They are also interested in their namesakes living in Georgia, whether they are famous across the country, how they live, etc. Majority of the interviewed express the wish to meet their namesakes and establish contacts with them in Georgia.

### **Georgian language**

Georgian language for the Georgians in Kurgan is one of the main factors for maintaining their identity. The general picture is such: most ethnic Georgians in Kurgan understand Georgian language. Elderly people know Georgian and more or less speak it, while among children,

there are many who do not speak or understand Georgian language at all. This seems to be due to the fact that the Georgians speak Turkish at home, they study at school in Turkish language. Besides children from villages are taken to boarding schools where they stay for months; they are provided with free education and food, and only return home on vacations. Being in Turkish language environment for a long time creates conditions for children in which they easily forget Georgian language.

Elderly people also remark the fact that the youth is forgetting Georgian language and blame themselves to a certain extent, since they do not speak Georgian with them and almost nothing is being done to preserve the language for future generations.

Among ethnic Georgians in Korgan, who more or less know the language, only a few can read and write.

In terms of preserving the language, we should note the possibility, which emerged on the decision of Turkish government. In September 2014, the Ministry of Education of Turkey approved the program of teaching Georgian language in schools. Provided that ten representatives of the minority express the desire to study the language, they will be given such opportunity. However, apart from technical side (textbooks, teachers) there is also a subjective factor. According to some Georgians from Kurgan, such program may only work in big cities of Turkey.

### **Distinction by appearance**

The Georgians from Kurgan often say that they can know each other “by looks” as their appearance is different from that of neighboring non-Georgian population. The respondents interviewed within this research, stated that they can tell a Georgian by appearance, as in their opinion, if a person’s mother or father is Georgian, he/she will have a kind of “Georgian look”.

It is also noteworthy that in the beginning of its existence, Georgian diaspora in Kurgan was a relatively closed community and people as a rule were married to each other within the diaspora. Today the circumstances have changed, and mixed Georgian-Turkish families are not a rarity. Clearly this is due to Turkish language knowledge and modern lifestyle, when the population move around more intensively. In the opinion of Kurgan diaspora representatives, they have become more “mobile” and more and more people go to Europe and Arab countries in search of work.

### **The desire to get Georgian citizenship**

That most ethnic Georgians in Kurgan have ethnic identity is proved by the fact that many of them are willing to get Georgian citizenship. It concerns double citizenship. In 2012, Mikhail Saakashvili, the then President of Georgia, granted Georgian citizenship to many Turkish residents, the majority of whom were ethnic Georgians, although there were ethnic Turks among them as well. The Georgians from Kurgan also expected to be granted Georgian citizenship and have applied for it, but in vain. Several respondents showed us the certificate of citizenship, but those who did not get it noted that not having citizenship was an obstacle for them in establishing business contacts with Georgia.

### **Links with Georgia: problems and perspectives**

#### **The obstacles in the relationships**

Georgians who have been settled in Turkey for a long time have been isolated from Georgia. Under Russian Empire and in particular, the Soviet Union, they had practically no links with their historical homeland. The period of “isolation from Georgia” lasted for 120 years. After restoring the independence of Georgia and opening Turkish-



Georgian borders, the major obstacles for communications have been lifted, but the long-lasting isolation has still left its trace.

Despite new and diverse ways of communications, the contacts of ethnic Georgians from Kurgan with their historical homeland are still limited.

Most of the interviewed in Kurgan, have never been to Georgia, and some of those who have crossed the border, have never gone further than Batumi. Only some individuals have visited Tbilisi and Kutaisi. As it turned out from conversations with respondents, the reason to arrive in Batumi was not to visit their historical homeland but to enjoy the opportunities of entertainment in Batumi. As a rule, this happens after the harvest, when they earn “much money”.

The lack of information on the existing situation in Georgia in the diaspora of Kurgan is apparent. For instance, they do not know what the political and social situation in Georgia is like, what religious confession most Georgians have, etc. A significant part of respondents, who did not show a great interest in establishing contacts with Georgia, claimed that they were too busy and had no time for it.

Georgian TV channels are available for ethnic Georgians in Kurgan, such as Ajara TV, but they rarely watch Georgian programs, since, on their words, the language they hear on TV is too fast for them to understand and they cannot follow. “Presenters speak too fast and they cannot understand”.

The youth in Kurgan has an access to the Internet, including social networks such as Facebook, Google, etc. Consequently, they can get information about Georgia and establish relationships with young people living in Georgia, however, there appear to be some serious problems in this regard as well. The main obstacle, which complicates communication, even via the Internet, is the language barrier. As we have noted above, elderly population knows the Georgian language better, whereas the knowledge of Georgian language is gradually being lost among young generation. It is possible to get information on Georgia

from a lot of Internet sources, although there is a language barrier here as well. Georgian websites rarely provide information in Turkish language, while the major part of Kurgan population do not know English in order to search information and get familiar with ongoing events in Georgia.

### **Different aspects in the interests towards Georgia**

The respondents who participated in this research can be divided into four groups: ordinary citizens, young people/students, business people and the representatives of local authorities. Each group has different attitudes and interests towards Georgia. For instance, the sphere of interest of ordinary citizens was to seek their distant relatives in Georgia and establish contacts with them. Some young people wanted to know if it was possible to continue studies in Georgia, however, as some of them noted, those who get education in Georgia cannot find employment in Turkey.

Business people were interested in the current economic situation and specific business sectors in Georgia. As for the representatives of local authorities, they are hoping to develop tourism and economic relations and therefore, they kindly cooperated with the research group.

Ethnic Georgians got actively involved in the process of research. Their participation was not limited to being only respondents, but they rendered serious help to the group of researchers by organizing the arrival of ethnic Georgians living in different villages at the meeting.

In terms of deepening the ties with Georgia, the following directions have been distinguished:

- Ordinary people – wishing to meet distant relatives living in Georgia;
- Part of young people- wishing to get education in Georgia;
- Business people – wishing to research Georgian market for establishing communications in the future.

## Conclusion

As a secondary identity, ethnic Georgians in Kurgan have maintained the basic elements of Georgian identity, however, it is showing the signs of disappearance. In case of expansion of contacts with Georgia, it will be possible to maintain and strengthen Georgian identity. At the same time, the increased contacts of Georgian diaspora with historical homeland will favor deepening Georgian-Turkish relations.

Based on the research results, the following recommendations have been drawn up:

1. It would be desirable if Georgian historians wrote the history of resettlement of Georgians to Ottoman land in order to preserve historical memory and publish it in Georgian and Turkish languages. Also to collect verbal family histories about Georgian diaspora and publish them;

2. To establish contacts with the administration of Ordu district and Kurgan municipality with the aim of deepening further relationships in the sphere of tourism, as well as economy and education.

3. To assist in the creation of Ethnographic Center jointly with Kurgan administration which is the desire of the Georgian diaspora in Kurgan;

4. To organize summer schools in Tbilisi or Batumi, which young ethnic Georgians, as well as Turks, if desired, will attend.

5. The government of Ajara Autonomous Republic and Kobuleti municipality, i.e. the region from which they immigrated and created Georgian diaspora in Kurgan, should strengthen contacts. According to Georgia diaspora representatives, they have a desire to meet their namesakes living in Georgia and this can be organized by the region from which their ancestors resettled.

6. Georgian higher educational institutions should provide scholarships (1-2) for free education to Georgian young people from Kurgan and organize language course. Most appropriate

place to do it would be in Batumi State University. This will encourage to study Georgian and educate future teachers who will later be able to teach Georgian in schools in Kurgan upon their wish.

7. It would be desirable to make a documentary about Georgian diaspora of Kurgan and resettlement to be shown on Turkish and Georgian TV channels.

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